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NSA director stresses harm of intelligence leaks in press

By Bill Gertz
 THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The director of the National Security Agency says intelligence leaks to the media have resulted in "paralysis" and "major misjudgments" in U.S. foreign and military policies and could lead to war.

"Secrecy and security are inextricably interwoven in the field of intelligence," Lt. Gen. William E. Odom said in a speech Saturday night. "The notion that the media stands as an unelected ombudsman with a constitutionally conferred mandate to extract all information on government activities and disseminate it to the uninformed citizenry has neither historical nor legal foundation.

"... If we go on in this way, we may lose the reconnaissance war, and eventually with it, the peace," he told the Association of Former Intelligence Officers.

The press, by publishing classified data, has cost taxpayers millions of dollars in compromised intelligence projects and can cause the death of U.S. agents, Gen. Odom said.

The NSA chief is responsible for the largest U.S. intelligence agency, which collects electronic intelligence, conducts code-breaking work and protects government communications. He has chided the media in the past for leaking details of U.S. electronic intelligence operations.

Leaks cause by policy disputes within government have eroded the intelligence community's ability to provide adequate information to policymakers, Gen. Odom said.

He cited as examples the failures to properly gauge Soviet strategic force growth in the 1960s and 1970s, the degradation of arms control verification methods and the decrease in the U.S. ability to follow and deal with terrorist activities.

Gen. Odom said leaks of classified information are "one of the most troubling and damaging problems the intelligence community faces today."

"Many in the media try unrelent-

ingly to pry loose highly classified information," he said. "Then they blame the leakers, refusing to accept any responsibility. . . .

"No court has ever accepted the principle of an unfettered public 'right to know,' and the media's facile assertion of this illusory 'right' skews informed discussion of genuine national interest in preserving the secrecy of national intelligence activities," Gen. Odom said. "Quite simply, there is no comprehensive 'right to know' included, either explicitly or implicitly, within the First Amendment."

The press disclosures of intelligence information stem from "lingering tension" left over from congressional investigations in the 1970s that left competing interests in the executive and legislative branch without the foreign policy consensus that existed prior to the Vietnam War, he said.

"Perhaps if the public were informed of the damage done, the media would be compelled to provide a better accounting for their actions," Gen. Odom said. "But they do not inform the public of the damage they have done even when intelligence officials give them strong reason to know they have."

A recent trend by some in the press to withhold classified informa-

tion from publication is a positive sign, he said.

"They do so at some peril to themselves because another paper or network may scoop them on information they believe should be withheld," Gen. Odom said. "They need our help as surely as we need theirs."

The intelligence community needs "help and empathy" from editors and reporters who are willing to set new standards "that will permit us to protect our national security interests, yet remain a free, open and informed society," he said.

"If we do not save our intelligence capabilities, if we fritter away through leaks and publicity, we may eventually pay a very large price in blood to save not only the First Amendment, but also the Constitution," said Gen. Odom.

The national interest sometimes should limit "the unbridled exercise of individual rights," he said. "It is clear from our experience of the last decade that we have gone far over the line in intelligence disclosures."

A growing counterespionage problem is the threat of electronic penetration of U.S. computer and information systems, such as the bugging of the new U.S. Embassy in Moscow, Gen. Odom said.

"I remain surprised at the continued disdain for security in many parts of our government, even after vulnerabilities and critical losses are identified," he said.

Gen. Odom's stark assessment of U.S. intelligence losses and damage contrasts sharply with statements

made last week by CIA Director William Webster.

Mr. Webster told reporters last week that despite recent failures, the CIA was continuing to recruit agents in Moscow.

However, a senior U.S. intelligence official said recently that the defection of a CIA officer and other security breaches "has made it very difficult to recruit agents in the Soviet Union.

"How would you feel if you were an agent in the Soviet Union and

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your name appeared on a list of CIA operations?" asked the official, who declined to be named. Several U.S. agents are presumed to have been killed by Soviet authorities, he said.

Meanwhile, in a speech Friday to the intelligence officers' organization, James Geer, FBI assistant director for intelligence, said U.S. operations of the KGB are in "disarray" following the expulsion last year of some 80 Soviet officials from the United States.

The FBI's top intelligence agent said the reduction in the number of senior Soviet spies severely disrupted KGB spy networks and is a factor contributing to a decrease in the number of espionage cases.

There were a rash of arrests between 1985 and 1986 in the so-called "year of the spy," Mr. Geer said, "but if you wonder why in the last few months we've seen none, [it's] because you have the Soviet services in disarray. . . .

"I believe one of the foremost things we can do in this business is keep it that way," he said.